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ABSTRACT

To provide a more permanent foundation for foreign language education in general and for extracurricular FLES programs in particular, a project was funded by the Iowa Humanities Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its overall goals were to ensure positive foreign language learning experiences for elementary and secondary school students and to sensitize foreign language teachers at all levels of instruction to the need for cooperation. The project's functions in meeting those goals were to: (1) establish communication between curricular (school-based) and extracurricular (community-based) foreign language programs within a community, (2) work for mutual understanding and support of foreign language goals for the various instructional levels within a community, and (3) develop cooperative efforts in classroom and special program activities on the various instructional levels. Implementation began in one community with a cooperative project, a foreign language week, established by the teachers of an existing secondary school French and Spanish program and an extracurricular, community-wide elementary-school level French, Spanish, and German program. Written and discussion-based evaluations of the project were conducted, and both possibilities and problems in future cooperation were identified. A suggested major change in future programs was the inclusion and cooperation of the school administration. Improved articulation was also strongly recommended. (MSE)

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Strengthening Community Foreign Language Programs through Communication Bridges

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Both the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (4) and the National Commission on Excellence in Education (2) noted the importance of improved and expanded foreign language programs in this country. These reports recognize that foreign language teaching should begin in grade school to allow students the years of study necessary for developing proficiency in a language.

The Iowa Governor's Task Force Report echoes the findings of the national reports, stating as its first recommendation the promotion of a comprehensive foreign language and international studies program. The report suggests that "the program should extend from kindergarten through college and beyond, in a coordinated effort to reach all Iowans" (1, p. 19). Yet in Iowa, local school districts are unable to fund programs in the elementary schools. It is parents committed to providing this opportunity for their children who organize extracurricular foreign language programs for elementary school children. In central Iowa during the 1983-84 school year, three communities initiated new extracurricular FLES (foreign language in the elementary school) programs and seven other communities were studying the possibility of establishing such a program (Rosenbusch, 3). Interest in FLES appears to be high throughout Iowa, judging from the numerous requests (almost 400) for the newly established Iowa FLES Newsletter.

These grassroots FLES programs can offer valuable experiences for

FL 015 589

Iowa's children. Their most important contributions are developing positive attitudes toward other languages and cultures and demonstrating to children that they can learn to speak a foreign language. The potential value of these programs can best be understood by reviewing the typical attitude many Iowans express toward foreign language education. The Iowa Governor's Task Force Report describes Iowans as accepting of what they believe to be the "practicalities of life": "No one ever uses a 'foreign' language." "Learning a foreign language is a waste of time and money." "Travel is expensive and difficult, given our location" (1, p. 11).

In spite of positive contributions to foreign language learning that extracurricular FLES programs make, the programs are vulnerable. Their strength lies in the dedication of organizers, most often the parents of children within the program. As years pass and their sons and daughters enter junior high school, these dedicated parent volunteers move on to support their children's new activities. Every few years, therefore, the program is in jeopardy until new parent volunteers are found. Typically, there is no base of aggressive support for the FLES programs, either in a community or beyond it, other than parents.

Schools cooperate with the FLES programs by offering meeting space but usually do not become further involved. Although it might seem logical for curricular foreign language teachers to be supportive of FLES programs, this frequently does not happen. In communities where FLES programs are being established, junior and senior high school language teachers feel threatened. They fear that if children were to have a negative experience with a foreign language in elementary school, they would be unlikely to continue in junior and senior high school, thus weakening the curricular program. Having a FLES program in a community can justify a reduction in some of the curricular foreign language courses, for example, the exploratory course.

For reasons such as these, teachers involved in curricular foreign language programs and those involved in extracurricular programs have not been working together to strengthen foreign language education. Instead, a pattern of noncooperation and noncommunication has been emerging in these communities. The lack of a state Foreign Language Consultant in the Department of Public Instruction prior to spring 1985, someone who might have actively encouraged articulation between programs within a community, has complicated the situation.

It is unsettling to realize that the enthusiasm of this grassroots effort might be short-lived and that Iowa's elementary school children in the future might not have the opportunity to discover the world beyond Iowa during their optimum years for learning about other cultures and languages. It seems imperative, therefore, to explore ways in which foreign language education can be strengthened, not only in extracurricular FLES programs, but also at all levels within a community.

Goals and Objectives

To provide a more permanent foundation for foreign language education in general and for extracurricular FLES programs in particular, a project was funded by the Iowa Humanities Board in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities. The goals of this project were as follows:

1. To ensure positive experiences in foreign language learning for students from elementary school through high school.
2. To sensitize foreign language teachers at all levels of instruction to the need for cooperation among them.

The following objectives were developed to meet these goals:

1. To establish a working communication bridge between curricular and extracurricular foreign language programs within a community.
2. To work for mutual understanding and support of foreign language program goals for the various levels of teaching within a community.
3. To develop cooperative efforts in both classroom and special program activities among the various levels of teaching.

Implementation of the Project

The program was implemented in an Iowa community with an established curricular program in French and Spanish at both junior and senior high school. The curricular program, taken by all students in seventh grade, consisted of a half-semester exploratory course in which both lan-

guages were introduced, followed by an elective five-year sequence in each language. An extracurricular program was also available to all elementary school children on a tuition basis. Spanish, French, and German were taught in this community-wide extracurricular program. Permission to carry out the humanities project with these programs was granted by both school administrators and the chairperson of the extracurricular program.

The project began in October with a half-day workshop for seven junior and senior high school foreign language teachers and twelve FLES tutors and parent coordinators. School administrators allowed curricular teachers to substitute this workshop for the regularly planned inservice day. The workshop included the following activities:

1. Viewing a videotape of a model FLES class.
2. Discussion of program goals and objectives discernible in the videotape compared with those of the local FLES program.
3. Comparison of goals and objectives of the FLES program, the seventh grade exploratory course, and the junior and senior high language sequence.
4. Definition of similarities and differences in goals and objectives among the three program types and an exploration of the reasons for areas of similarity and difference.
5. Brainstorming ideas for ways in which FLES and curricular programs could cooperate and mutually enhance their shared goals and objectives.
6. Establishment of a communications system between the curricular and extracurricular programs and a plan for continued communication/cooperation.

The videotape was viewed by the total group and served as a focal point to initiate discussion in small groups. Each group—with representatives from the junior and senior high language sequence courses, the junior high exploratory course, and FLES—was given worksheets to record the objectives and methodology of each of the three types of programs. As this was the first time communication among program levels had occurred, an hour was provided for this discussion to allow an in-depth sharing of ideas.

Findings of each small group were shared with the total group and recorded on the blackboard as "similarities" and "differences" among the

three program levels. Examples of similarities found in all three types of programs are an emphasis on oral communication, the teaching of culture, the teaching of grammar (inductively at some levels), the development of a positive attitude toward learning a foreign language, and the use of visuals. Program organization and administration was found to be dissimilar: FLES has smaller classes with fewer meeting times per week, a flexible curriculum, and high parent involvement in the program. Methodology was another dissimilarity: FLES uses games regularly while games are a reward in the other levels, FLES is all oral having no written work as do the other two levels, FLES has a higher proportion of student-to-student communication, and FLES changes activities more frequently during a class period than do the other program levels.

Brainstorming by the total group resulted in ideas for ways in which FLES and the curricular programs could work together in the future. Teachers and/or students of the various levels could visit the classes of a different level, and teaching materials could be loaned among the various levels. Foreign Language Week could be celebrated with shared activities such as a food fair for the community, and newspaper articles could be prepared about the total foreign language program in the community. Finally, administrators could be kept well informed of the developing cooperation.

Coordinating Group

A coordinating group of three curricular teachers (chosen by the curricular staff) and four FLES representatives (selected by the FLES program chairperson) was formed in order to develop and put into action a plan of cooperation among the program levels. This coordinating group was to meet again within two weeks. Project directors informed the administration of the results of this first meeting by letter, a practice they continued after each subsequent meeting.

By the time the coordinating group met in early November, several visits were made by the FLES teachers to curricular classes for observation or sharing. As a first step in making a smooth transition between the FLES and exploratory programs, it was decided that FLES teachers would provide exploratory course teachers with the names of FLES students entering the exploratory program and a list of the vocabulary they had studied.

The group decided to write a newspaper article together informing the community about the curricular and extracurricular programs. The article was later published in the local newspaper.

The coordinating group met again in January and discussed how Foreign Language Week might be celebrated together. The group also suggested that two inservice days of the curricular teachers be set aside in the next school year for continued communication among programs. The project directors conveyed this request to the school administrators.

In a February meeting, plans for the joint celebration of Foreign Language Week were completed. Fifth- and sixth-grade FLES students would visit the exploratory classes and present some of their achievements to the upper level classes, and the older students would also share what they had learned with the younger ones. As these visits were to occur during school time, permission was requested from the administration. In order to inform the community about the celebration of Foreign Language Week, plans were made to photograph these visits and to write another article for the local newspaper.

Because the administration did not approve the requests for classroom visits during school time, the original plan for the celebration of Foreign Language Week was altered. Elementary principals were invited to visit FLES classes, and several of them did so. Differences in schedules permitted some groups of FLES and curricular students to exchange visits and share conversations, songs, and activities outside of school time; and an article and photographs of the exchanges appeared in the local paper. Except for the final evaluation, the events of Foreign Language Week concluded the project activities.

Evaluation of Project

The project was evaluated in two ways: through a written evaluation form and in an evaluation session held with the coordinating group. All who participated in the first workshop received a letter asking for their cooperation in evaluating the project, a list of the goals and accomplishments of the project, and an evaluation form. Thirteen of the nineteen evaluation forms were completed and returned, a 68 percent return rate.

Results of the evaluation forms were summarized and shared with the coordinating group in their evaluation session. Responses to items on the

evaluation form were positive, indicating that respondents felt that the goals of the project had been accomplished: 30 percent of the responses were marked "Strongly agree"; 60 percent were marked "Agree"; and 9 percent were "No opinion." Only one response was marked "Disagree" and no responses were marked "Strongly disagree."

All but three participants wrote comments on the evaluation form as requested, providing insight into their thinking. A number of comments indicated that communication links had indeed been established among the teachers. Many of them indicated that had it not been for the project, they would not have met nor worked together with teachers from other programs. One respondent noted that "the project helped eliminate an invisible wall between the programs," and that "teachers feel more comfortable about each program and feel more free to contact each other." Another wrote that they "gained a respect for each other's programs" as they learned more about them. Participants cited the classroom visits and the newspaper articles as positive outcomes.

Although the project did establish communication bridges and was viewed as successful in accomplishing its goals, five participants expressed concern about further work to establish a positive relationship between the curricular and extracurricular programs. Problem areas included:

1. The need for more cooperation with school administration.
2. The existence of personal misunderstandings between teachers at the FLES and secondary levels.
3. The importance of coordination and articulation between curricular and extracurricular programs.
4. The recognition and fear of the changes that the FLES program will mandate in the secondary curriculum.

One participant suggested that articulation should be the goal of future projects in order to "increase the seriousness, the importance, and the valuable outcomes for all concerned."

After reviewing the responses to the written evaluation, members of the coordinating group were asked to write goals for the community's total foreign language program for the next five years. The larger group then divided into two smaller groups, each having representatives from the extracurricular FLES and the curricular program. The preliminary goal statements were then divided randomly between the two groups. The

groups reviewed the statements, discussed them, and, based on these materials, developed a goal statement on which they could all agree. The total group then reconvened to examine the similarities and differences in their statements and to define a shared goal statement.

The final goal statement that was shared with the administration and with all project participants follows (not necessarily in order of importance):

1. Develop community awareness of the necessity of a long-term commitment in learning a foreign language.
2. Demonstrate to the community, administrators, and school board the importance of foreign language study.
3. Work to create the position of Foreign Language Coordinator to coordinate and articulate the community's extracurricular and curricular foreign language programs.
4. Continue the meetings of teachers of all levels to help establish articulation among the various levels of foreign language teaching.
5. Study similar foreign language programs throughout the U.S. to learn from their experiences.
6. Continue to share special activities among the various levels, especially during Foreign Language Week.
7. Work to establish a summer foreign language program based on the concepts of immersion and/or a global perspective.

Based on the positive evaluation of the project, the directors are convinced that the groundwork has been laid for further communication and cooperation since teachers are now acquainted with one another, are more familiar with the programs, and have cooperated in successful joint ventures. The directors believe, however, that several changes should be made in carrying out this project in other communities.

Recommendations for Future Projects

A major change recommended for future projects would be the involvement of the school administration, as well as the administrators of the FLES program. The project would be carried out at the request of the school administration rather than at the request of the project directors. In this pilot project, the directors asked for and were granted permission

to carry out the project with their teachers; school administrators cooperated by allowing one inservice day for the first meeting. Administrators were informed of the accomplishments of the project through telephone communications and letters, but no administrative representative observed or participated directly. To increase teacher commitment to the project, the teachers need to know that cooperation between the extracurricular and curricular programs is also a goal to which the administration is committed. The pilot project was designed with only one large group meeting at the beginning to eliminate the need for more than one inservice day for the curricular teachers. Because teachers who were negative toward the other type of program (curricular or extracurricular) did not have sufficient opportunities for developing in-depth understanding and appreciation for another point of view, the directors recommend more large group contacts through the school year. Although curricular members of the coordinating group were chosen by their peers, and FLES representatives were selected by the FLES chairperson, coordinating group members tended to be those who were already interested in cooperation between the programs and already open to establishing working relationships.

The role of the project directors was not to impose their own concerns upon the group but rather to establish the means for communication so that group members might define the issues for themselves. In the pilot study, the group did not initially identify articulation as a point of concern, yet in the final evaluation, four individuals cited articulation as an important issue. The coordinating group also defined articulation as an important goal in their final meeting. Perhaps more than anything else, this indicates the importance of continuing the communication established through the project.

The directors believe that it is important that such projects be directed by cofacilitators experienced with one of the types of program—junior and senior high curricular and FLES extracurricular. It is also important that project directors not be from the community nor represent the administration. In this way representatives know that their concerns will be accepted and understood and that they can participate in the dialogue openly instead of defensively. The two facilitators serve as models of cooperation as together they provide this experience for the community.

Conclusion

The directors and participants made the project goals a reality. Foreign language students had positive experiences through visits to classes at other levels and through Foreign Language Week activities. Foreign language teachers at all levels of instruction met one another and, through exchange of ideas, came to understand one another better. The communication bridge established through the project is serving to strengthen the community's foreign language program.

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